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COLOMBIA'S GAINS ARE AMERICA'S, TOO
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THE dramatic rescue of 15 hostages this month by Colombia's special forces underscored how far Colombia has progressed — with the strong support of the United States — from a nation under siege by narcoterrorists and paramilitary vigilantes to one poised to become a linchpin of security and prosperity in South America.

As we meet today in Washington to discuss the United States-Colombia security relationship, we want to take stock of what has been gained over the past decade and commit our two nations to continue this progress.

The remarkable transformation of the security situation in Colombia can be credited in large part to the improvement in the capacity of its military and police — an improvement in which American security assistance has played a key role. The governments of both nations agree that this assistance should continue until the job is finished. Furthermore, we should also increase trade and investment by moving forward on the United States-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement that is now before Congress. Growing prosperity and better standards of living are indispensable to achieving lasting stability in both countries.

Over all, our two nations should take care not to squander the investment we have already made — some \$5 billion on the part of the United States plus significantly more in Colombian resources — now that these efforts are showing such promising results.

Consider that eight years ago, illegal armed groups involved in cocaine and heroin production controlled more than 70 percent of the Colombian countryside. Today the most dangerous and vicious of the groups — the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC — has seen a sharp drop in its strength and status. Once 18,000 strong, the group has lost half its forces along with whatever credibility and following it had elsewhere in Latin America. The other major militias, the National Liberation Army and the United Self-Defense Forces, no longer pose a serious threat.

Since 2002, Colombia has doubled the size of its security forces. Last October, the two of us observed Colombian troops conducting drills at their training base in the western city of Tolimaida. These brave men and women have pushed terrorists and drug traffickers into the farthest reaches of Colombia's mountains and jungles. Mayors and police officers are now at their posts in every municipality.

Military pressure, combined with incentives for those who lay down their arms under Colombia's demobilization program, has encouraged thousands of narcoterrorists to turn themselves in and share information with the government. Children once forced to serve in armed groups can now take advantage of reintegration programs that offer hope for a decent future. Violence has declined significantly — kidnapping, terrorist acts and attacks against trade unionists are down by approximately 80 percent.

While the cultivation and export of narcotics continues to be a problem, Colombia has eliminated two-thirds of its opium production and more than 500 traffickers have been extradited to the United States. In 2007, half a million acres of illicit coca crops were eradicated.

Even so, there are challenges ahead. The Colombian government must strengthen its authority in areas previously controlled by terrorists. Remnants of these bandit armies could continue their murderous ways as smaller, independent groups. That is why it is so important that American security assistance not be reduced — at least not until Colombia has control of its borders, and police departments, municipal governments and other government services are firmly established in all areas.

Other countries must also help. Over the years, FARC elements have operated illegally from across Colombia's borders, and we will need those neighbors' cooperation to eliminate the threat. And, as always, the United States and other nations must make a sustained effort to cut the demand for narcotics that finance these violent groups.

Finally, to achieve lasting peace and stability, Colombia must have more foreign investment and free trade. Congress's approval of the trade promotion agreement would establish a commitment to open markets that would increase growth and

investment. Moreover, it would allow American products to enter Colombia duty-free.

Colombia's hard-won freedom from violence can be sustained only through economic prosperity. Together, as partners, we must see Colombia's transformation to completion. In winning the war, we must also consolidate the peace.

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